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**Beyond the Unitary State?**

**Public Opinion, Political Institutions and Public**

**Policy in Brittany**

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### **Abstract**

This article investigates the new regionalism in Brittany, one of France's historic regions. It is based on findings from a mass opinion survey carried out in July 2001, as well as on insights drawn from over 70 semi-structured interviews. The quantitative and qualitative evidence is interpreted through reference to four hypotheses, concerning issues of Breton identity, autonomy, pragmatism and political opportunity structures. While our findings allow us to establish the pertinence of the new regionalist problematic in Brittany, we conclude that in the French case theories of 'new regionalism' must be understood within the framework of an overarching state tradition that regulates and channels regional pressures and creates strong incentives for a system of national political regulation.

Since 1945, the “regional question” has rarely been off academic and political agendas. However, the way in which the question has been conceptualised and political and public policy approaches to it have varied quite considerably. During the heyday of the Welfare State, “regions” were generally viewed as *objects* of policies designed by national governments to bring about a convergence of economically weaker regions with the most advanced. The basic aim of this approach was, from a political perspective, to produce integrated national polities and, from an economic perspective, to bring into productivity those territorial regions that had fallen behind. The expectation during this period on the part of political elites and most academic theorists was that regions would be eventually assimilated into a homogenous state system. “Regionalism”, and, a fortiori, “ethnic nationalism”, were viewed as expressions of political backwardness and conservatism. This was especially the case in France. It was not surprising, therefore, that the first regionalist movements developed as movements, which were primarily concerned with formulating a political project that was in line with this dominant thinking and, only secondarily, with protecting their traditional languages and cultures. Brittany was an exemplar in this regard as we show below.

By the 1990s, the context throughout Europe had changed radically. After a period of about twenty years in which a number of wider forces – globalisation, Europeanisation, neo-liberalism, new public management approaches – had reshaped the nature, role and functions of nation-states, the “regional question” came to be formulated quite differently from the early 1960s. By this time, the top-down regional policies of the Keynesian state had given way to a new bottom-up model of regional development, based on notions such as the “innovative” or “learning” regions, where

regions became political actors in their right and were engaged in a situation of *competitive regionalism*. This time the framework in which these processes were occurring was no longer simply the nation-state (although this remains a key frame or reference) but a wider context encompassing the European Union and also the wider international arena. Although there was some early interest in the notion of a “Europe of the Regions” this soon gave way to a more realistic appraisal which toned down the issue to a recognition that regions (and other sub-national authorities) are now key players in a wider system of European governance. At the same time, national governments remain even more important players alongside the supranational institutions of the European Union. The nature and consequences of these changes is still the subject of a vast debate in the social sciences. In any case, it is possible to speak today of a “new regionalism” although this term is used in different ways to cover a wide variety of normative and analytical positions with regard to “the regional question” (Keating and Loughlin, 1997, Keating 1998, Loughlin, 2001)

This article investigates the new regionalism in Brittany, one of France’s historic regions. It forms part of a much larger project comparing processes of regional governance in Wales and Brittany, in which we investigate devolution and decentralisation as two alternative forms of regional institution building undertaken in two states – France and the United Kingdom – with distinctive non-federal (unitary or union) traditions.<sup>1</sup> Though both devolution and decentralisation were initially

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<sup>1</sup> The research project from which this article is drawn investigates processes of regional governance in two cognate yet distinctive regions: Wales and Brittany. We compare the politics, policies and polity building dynamics of devolution in Wales and decentralisation in the French region of Brittany. In particular, we compare three distinct dimensions of the policy system: policy communities (through in-depth interviews in the two regions), issue-networks (via a detailed questionnaire); and public opinion

envisaged as new technocratic forms of steering at a distance, each has assumed a specific character dependent in part upon narrow institutional arrangements, but also more generally upon political opportunity structures, the distribution of social capital, the linkages between identities and institutions and the nature of territorial policy

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(through a mass opinion poll carried out in both regions in July-August 2001). This article presents preliminary attitudinal data from the Brittany poll. The research is part of an ESRC-financed project on 'Devolution and Decentralisation in Wales and Brittany' (Grant number L 219 25 2007). We thank the council for its support. Market Research Wales and Effience 3 simultaneously carried out the public opinion surveys in Wales and Brittany in June and July 2001. A representative sample of 1007, selected by quotas of age, gender, socio-economic group and locality, was interviewed in each region. We also carried out 72 interviews in Brittany from April-September 2001. These interviews were taped and transcribed. They lasted an average of one hour. We identified three types of actor: regional political actors, language policy actors and training policy actors. We started with several names suggested to us by our advisory group and then relied upon the snowball technique to ensure a wide coverage. We thank all our interviewees for their co-operation, as well as the following organisations: AGEFAFORIA, AGEFOS-PME, ANPE, AREF-BTP, ARIFOPE, Association of Breton-speaking firms, Association 'Identité Bretonne', Brittany Chamber of Agriculture, Brittany Chamber of Commerce, Brittany Cultural Council, Brittany Cultural Institute, Brittany Economic and Social Chamber, Brittany Regional Council, Brittany Regional Prefecture (SGAR), CEREQ, CFDT, CIJB, Communes of Lorient, Nantes, Rennes, Carhaix and Chateaugiron, DASTUM, DIHUN, DIORENN, DIV'YEZH, DIWAN, Education ministry, European Bureau of Lesser Used languages, FR3, Helio Ouest SA, Kuzul ar Brezhoneg, Labour and training ministry, Local Mission Rennes, Ofis ar Brezhoneg, OPCA-REG, Pays de la Loire Regional Council, PLI, Projet NEC, PS, Quimper Chamber of Commerce, Rennes Chamber of Commerce, Rennes University (1), Rennes University (2), Saveol, SA, Skol Ober, Skol an Emsav, STUMDI, TES, TIAVRO, TV Breizh, UPIB and the Youth and Sports ministry.

problems. Through comparison within and across nations, we will eventually provide a framework for considering new regionalism within unitary states.

It makes much more sense to test for the emergence of a new regionalism in a traditionally unitary state such as France, or a union state such as the UK, than in states with longer established federal (Germany) or regionalist (Spain) traditions, where one would expect strong regional institutions. We started with a number of working hypotheses designed to uncover the existence or otherwise of a regional Breton identity, its linkage with institutional and policy preferences and the likely future institutional development of regionalism in France.

Our first hypothesis was that Breton identity is weak, and, by implication, debate about the new regionalism is misplaced in France. We rejected this hypothesis from the outset. The Paris-based Observatoire interrégional du politique (OIP) has been tracking support for regional political institutions in France from 1986 onwards. In the annual OIP survey, Brittany consistently emerges as the mainland French region with the strongest sense of its own identity. Through selecting Brittany, we are consciously studying a highly distinctive region within a nation-state - France - that is usually taken as the paradigm of a strong central state. A second hypothesis, long consistent with official attitudes within the French state, is that there is no demand for enhanced regional autonomy, a hypothesis we test (and reject) below.

A third hypothesis (consistent with the traditional French republican models) posited that citizens in Brittany were likely to adopt an instrumental or pragmatic stance towards extending the domain of regional policy intervention, though this in no way

implied the absence of regional consciousness. Bretons have traditionally placed their faith in the French state (rather than Breton authorities) to deliver public goods, convinced that Brittany has fared well from the top-down, centralised pattern of territorial management. Playing up Breton identity serves a useful function, insofar as it encourages the central state to channel scarce resources to its peripheral, and potentially rebellious region. This hypothesis presupposes that Bretons fall on the instrumental side of the instrumental/identity spectrum and that they are conscious of the limits of regional capacity building within the context of French republicanism.

Moving from the electorate, *stricto sensu*, to the wider policy community, a fourth hypothesis focuses upon the political opportunity structure. As political parties aggregate interests, so parties are more likely to shape voter preferences than the other way around. National parties, rather than regionally specific ones have always dominated the Breton political scene. Bretons have been spectacularly successful in positioning themselves as national leaders - in all parties – and have had little to gain by raising symbolic divisive issues such as language or enhanced devolution.

Brittany's political elite has adapted to the French logic of territorial decentralisation, having itself had a major influence in forcing decentralisation onto the political agenda, and in obtaining disproportionate resources through playing up, within limits, its territorial distinctiveness. This model of influence is a traditional one of bringing pressure to bear in Paris.

Both the first and the second hypotheses allow us – by their refutation - to establish the pertinence of the new regionalist problematic in the Breton case. In the case of the third and fourth hypotheses, theories of 'new regionalism' must be understood



within the framework of an overarching state tradition that regulates and channels regional pressures and creates strong incentives for a system of national political regulation. We consider the pertinence of these hypotheses in the conclusion. First, we set out the context of regionalism in France and the specific characteristics of the Brittany region.

### **Regionalism in France**

Regionalisation in France dates back to the late 1950s but reached its high point in the period 1982-1986 with the setting up of elected regional councils as part of a wider programme of decentralisation (Cole and John, 2001, Loughlin and Mazey, 1995). The regional institution in France is the result of a long process of what might be called “creeping institutionalisation” as it was gradually (and grudgingly) granted a position in the politico-administrative system alongside the *départements* and the *communes*. The regional institution was established while retaining the longer established and, in many ways, more powerful *départements*. Large cities and towns had also become powerful levels of sub-national government (Hoffmann Martinot, 1999, Le Galès, 1995). The regions might, therefore, be considered the ‘poor cousins’ of French sub-national government.

To a large extent, the 1982 reforms were carried out in the context of the Welfare State approaches, which we identified above. These reforms considerably modified the French politico-administrative landscape and its system of central-local relations although not particularly through making them more transparent and coherent. On the contrary, decentralisation and regionalisation have produced a rather chaotic and

unclear situation in which different levels of government and different actors, including the field services of the central state, compete for scarce resources. Consistent with the territorial management policies of the post-war French state, French administrative regions were first established in the 1950s as technocratic advisory bodies to assist in strategic functions of economic development, transportation and territorial planning. They have been fully operational sub-national authorities only since 1986, with their main (limited) responsibilities in economic development, transportation, education, training and culture. French regions were created in a standardised form throughout the French territory, including in areas where no regional tradition existed. The Region of the Centre thus enjoys exactly the same prerogatives as Brittany. Regional boundaries do not usually respect the informal boundaries of France's historic regions. To institutionalise France's historic regions would be tantamount to admitting the posthumous existence of a union state of the UK variety, rather than the French unitary version. This highlights the technocratic nature of French decentralisation; proximity would produce more effective decision-making, but was not intended to give rise to 'communautarian' or regionalist identities.

Decentralisation was intended to promote local democracy and administrative efficiency, not to challenge the underlying principles of the French unitary state, although some of the older regionalist demands (e.g. a Corsican *Statut Particulier*) were taken on board while others (e.g. a unified Basque *département*) were quietly dropped. We should note that administrative 'deconcentration' (the creation of the regional prefectures in 1964) preceded political decentralisation by two decades. This

is important, as the tentacular French State has never abandoned its territorial ambitions.

Some of the regional councils such as Rhône-Alpes (despite its artificial character and lack of regional identity) have succeeded in carving out a niche for themselves as “strong” regions, while others, such as Languedoc-Roussillon, have manifestly failed to do so. Brittany, today finds itself somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. The term “region”, as applied to Brittany, is ambiguous as it can refer to both the institution embodied in the current regional council with its four departments (Côtes-d’Armor, Finistère, Ille-et-Vilaine and Morbihan) and to the geographically wider historic “region”, including the Loire Atlantique *département*, corresponding more or less to the ancient Duchy of Brittany. The survey on which this article is based was carried out in the area covered by the existing region, known sometimes as B4. This article presents some preliminary findings of the attitude survey we carried out in Brittany. These findings illustrate what people living in Brittany think of their region and how they envisage its future development. The article is structured around three groups of questions asked in the survey. Where should decisions be made? What are the priorities for regional public expenditure? How does public opinion envisage future institutional developments? In the conclusion, we address the possible implications of our findings for the future development of the French polity. We begin with a brief presentation of politics in post-war Brittany.

### **Brittany: a French Region with a Difference**

One of the most distinctive regions of France, Brittany has a strong sense of its specific position within French society. Formerly an independent Duchy (from 818 to 1532), then a French province with special prerogatives (1532-1789), reduced for long to being a collection of disparate *départements* before becoming an administrative then political region, modern Brittany is a French region with a difference. Unlike many other French regions, it can look to its past existence as an independent political entity, with its own founding myths and political institutions. Though the symbols of statehood have long been repressed, the region retains many distinctive characteristics. The Breton language is the European continent's only Celtic language. The enduring symbolic importance of the Catholic religion is ever present physically in the architecture of Breton villages, as well in higher than average rates of religious practice. The spectacular growth of Breton cultural movements (dance, theatre, costume, and music) is testament to a revival of Breton values and self-consciousness.

At a more abstract level, observers have noted the capacity of Breton actors to join forces to promote their common interests and to defend Brittany against attacks from the outside world. Breton solidarity can also be gauged more intuitively by the effectiveness of Breton elite-level networks in Paris and Brussels, and by the importance of the Breton Diaspora in retaining a sense of distinctiveness. Breton politicians have been especially assertive in the defence of Breton interests in Paris. From 1950 onwards, Breton actors of all political persuasions co-operated closely in the CELIB - Comité de d'étude et de liaison des intérêts bretons – the archetype of a post-war regional advocacy coalition. The CELIB could claim the credit for many of the improvements in transport infrastructure consented to the Brittany region in the

1960s and 1970s. Lobbying Paris to obtain resources for Brittany represented a regional adaptation of traditional Welfare-oriented intergovernmental models, theorised with talent by Crozier and Thoenig (1975).

If all main political tendencies have been well represented in post-war Brittany (except the Front national) the prevalent post-war political tradition is best described as one of political centrism. In the immediate post-war period, Brittany was the birthplace and one of the bastions of French Christian democracy and, though in decline, powerful vestiges remain. With the creation of the Fifth Republic, it could not resist the national pull of Gaullism, though Gaullism only slowly created a space for itself in local government. Brittany also contributed markedly to the rise of the new Socialist Party (PS) from the 1970s onwards, with the Socialist Party in Brittany subtly imbued with values representative of the underlying Breton political culture (left Catholicism, social partnership, links with voluntary associations) (Hanley, 1984, Sawicki, 1993). The French Communist Party (PCF) also established its own strongholds in the ‘red triangle’ of north-west and central Brittany and was supportive from an early date of many of the Breton movement’s ‘anti-colonial’ demands (Lebesque, 1970). Long resistant to national trends, the recent decline of the PCF in Brittany represents the beginning of the end of an original model of rural communism, largely to the benefit of the PS. Only the far-right National Front (FN) has failed to establish solid bases in Brittany, notwithstanding Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Breton origins. The case of the FN illustrates well the innate cohesion of Breton political culture. Having been spared the ravages of excessive urbanisation, industrial decline and unemployment, Brittany’s social networks have remained largely intact, providing a barrier to the breakthrough of the far-right movement. The persistence of Catholicism

and weak immigration are also powerful explanatory factors, as the Catholic clergy at all levels explicitly opposed racist and xenophobic attitudes among their followers.

The dominant political culture is one of political accommodation. Breton politicians of all parties, however divided they are internally, will tend to close ranks against threats from the outside. Despite a strong regional identity, Brittany has not produced significant regionalist parties, or at least parties that have been capable of winning seats in departmental, regional or national elections. Only one left-wing regionalist party, the Democratic Breton Union (UDB) has managed some victories at the municipal level and then usually in collaboration with the PS. This apparent paradox might be explained by the predominance of the consensual political traditions mentioned above. Le Coadic (1998) interprets this phenomenon as a consequence of the deeply rooted legitimist strand within Breton public opinion. Imbued by a Catholic, conformist ethic, the Breton public is not prepared to support pro-independence or pro-autonomist parties. This conformist sentiment is reflected in the modest scores obtained in elections by the UDB and the smaller Breton regional or autonomist parties. We should also note that the mainstream political parties in Brittany, especially the PS but also the UDF and RPR, have adopted regionalist themes and are more “regionalist” than their national counterparts. This is true even of the RPR President of the Brittany Region, Josselin De Rohan, who has a much more “regionalist” discourse than his RPR colleagues in most of the rest of France. Although Breton regionalism has, at times, been violent, this never reached the levels experienced in Corsica, the Spanish Basque country or Northern Ireland.

We now look at where decisions should be made in more detail.

## **Where should decisions be made? Public Opinion and Political Institutions in Brittany**

We will now examine the attitudes of the general population towards the regional institution as it functions at present and how it ought to develop. It is against the backdrop of twenty years of partial and untidy decentralisation in a traditionally unitary state that we undertook our fieldwork in Brittany. As a preliminary to answering our question ‘where should decisions be made’, we sought first to establish the degree of trust that existed in the Brittany Regional Council as its currently functions. The results are presented in Table One.

--- Table One around here ---

Table One reveals a high measure of trust in the Brittany regional council as a political institution, despite its limited powers. Trust evokes sentiments of honesty, a culture of co-operation and a high level of social capital. One would expect Brittany to score highly on such a measure, given the importance of co-operative movements (in mutual banks and agricultural co-operatives) and consensual Breton political traditions. There is also overwhelming support for the principle of decentralisation, a theme we develop in more detail below. These findings suggest a strong political capital for the Brittany Region, evidence consistent with the conclusions of the annual regional surveys conducted by the Paris-based Observatoire Interrégional du Politique. From 1995 to 1999, Bretons were consistently amongst the most enthusiastic ‘regionalists’ in France and were the most likely to identify the Brittany

region as an historic entity. Our findings suggest a strong groundswell of general support for regional political institutions in Brittany.

Bretons do not simply identify their region with the geographical boundaries of the current regional institution (B4) but see it as also including the fifth “lost” *département* of Loire-Atlantique. This is shown by the responses to our question on the reunification of the five *départements*. Our poll suggests powerful public support for the reunification of historic Brittany (over 62 per cent strongly in favour or in favour) , a sentiment shared across the political and geographical spectrum, with only minor variations according to *département*, partisan allegiance or other variables. There was heightened awareness of this issue during fieldwork in Brittany. On 30 June 2001 – forty years after the division of historic Brittany – a mass demonstration took place in Nantes in favour of reunification. The Loire Atlantique departmental council then unanimously voted a motion in favour of being incorporated into Brittany. Unanimity was short-lived, however, as in October 2001, the Rennes municipal council opposed unification: a reunified Brittany would challenge the leading role of the Breton capital.

---Table Two around here ---

This general support for the regional level is confirmed in the specific areas of policy decisions regarding the Breton language and training policy. The comparative project from which this article is drawn focuses in part on these two policy issue-areas where a strong case can be made for regional policy action, either on the basis of proximity or identity. This claim is born out in our comparative surveys. Public opinion in



Brittany (and Wales) strongly believes that the regional authorities *ought* to make the main decisions in the two fields of training and regional languages. In Brittany, the region comes out ahead of other levels – national, local or European. In the case of the Breton language, the Regional council is identified as the appropriate level by a majority of respondents (53 per cent). This is all the more remarkable in that the region has no formal responsibility for taking decisions concerning language and does not have a particularly active record in this area. Unlike in Wales, for example, there has been no effort, even symbolic, to use Breton in Regional Council proceedings. Until 1998, the Region provided grants to the Breton-medium DIWAN schools and to a host of Breton cultural movements, but successive regional majorities fought shy of taking a firm position on promoting the Breton language. Following the exceptional circumstances of the 1998 regional election in Brittany, there has been a marked change. The Centre-Right (UDF-RPR- DL) list only held onto the majority as a result of a deal struck with four autonomist-minded independents, led by Jean Yves Cozan, a UDF dissident from the Finistère department. Cozan was offered a new portfolio – Breton Identity. Occupying a pivotal position within the Regional Council, Cozan has used his influence to increase the culture budget and to create a set of institutions to promote the use of the Breton language. The creation of the Breton Language Office (*Ofis ar Brezhoneg*) in 1999 heralded the new priority adopted by (or imposed upon) the Brittany Region in favour of the Breton language. Increased budgets for Breton language and culture followed. Despite the paradox of a hesitant region adopting stronger policies in favour of the language, the importance of this finding in favour of the region should be emphasised. The French government is seen not only as too distant, but also too ambivalent towards the Breton language which our findings indicate is viewed with a capital of cultural sympathy, even though its use is marginal.

These findings are a clear challenge to the traditional viewpoint of the French government in favour of a system of national linguistic uniformity. Other political institutions – local government and the European Union – are not considered as serious contenders for the exercise of influence in this area.

The findings for training policy provide further support for the regional level. Training is the interdependent policy domain par excellence; there are many policy stakeholders involved. The region is in charge of youth training – of 16 to 26 year olds – and has a growing influence in continuing and adult education. The French State retains control over many training programmes and specific populations. The European Union is determined to push its own influence over regional training policies. Many French local authorities themselves (communes, inter-communal structures and *départements*) have launched their own training programmes. Social partners (trade unions and employers) are also far more active in training than in the language domain. Given this complexity, the high proportion of those considering training to be a regional policy domain adds to the legitimacy of regional intervention in this sphere.

Our first series of questions allow us to deduce a strong underpinning of support for regional political institutions in Brittany, as well as a desire to enhance the regional level in some specific areas over the local, national and European levels. But we must be careful not to draw too many conclusions from these findings; this becomes apparent when we consider preferences for regional expenditure.

## **What priorities for regional action? Public Opinion and spending priorities in Brittany**

Regional public spending priorities are indicative not only of actual policy choices, but also of the beliefs in the appropriateness of public intervention at different levels in specific policy fields. Even in the most federally inclined system, for example, it would be difficult to imagine defence expenditure being a major priority for a sub-national authority. On the other hand, services such as education or health can be organised at a variety of levels of territorial governance. The findings presented below for Brittany demonstrate a realistic appraisal of the limited powers of the French regions, providing strong support for our third hypothesis. They suggest that Breton public opinion has fully integrated the constraints of French decentralisation into its preferences.

### ---Table Three ---

The survey proceeded to ask an open-ended question ('If your region had more money to spend, where should its first two priorities lie') seeking to elicit the Breton public's preferences for regional public expenditure. Table Three presents a hierarchy of the expressed first and second preferences.

The Breton public's regional expenditure preferences pinpoint issues of specific regional importance: the environment, economic development, transport, tourism, training and culture. The first priority was the environment. Environmental issues are high on the political agenda in Brittany, which has to face specific challenges

unknown to most other French regions. In part this is a consequence of its geographical position as a peninsula at the western-most point of the European continent. Brittany has suffered from a string of ecological disasters, the most recent being the running aground of the Erika oil tanker in December 1999 (Gémie, 2001). Identifying the environment as the most important priority for regional expenditure is in part testament to the active record of the Brittany region in this domain and to the perceived proximity of the regional level. It also represents a reaction against the failings of the French State. Breton public opinion was harsh in its criticism of the regional prefecture and of the French Environment minister over the Erika affair. Paradoxically, the awareness of environmental issues has also been heightened by a reaction against the intensive farming methods of the type that for long underpinned the Breton agricultural model (Canevet, 1992). Awareness of the environmental damage caused by intensive farming (pollution, water contamination, and soil erosion) has been a painful discovery for one of France's main agricultural regions. This finding backs up evidence from published monographs, which credit Bretons with a strong attachment to their natural environment (Le Coadic, 1998) We can also deduce an economic motive, as important sectors of the regional economy – farming, fishing and the agro-alimentary industry – depend on a clean environmental image and practice.

The second priority for regional expenditure identified in the survey is economic development. There is an established post-war tradition of public intervention in supporting the Breton economy, whether through direct investment or through providing transport infrastructure. Brittany's post-war economic take-off was driven from the mid-1950s by central state directed investments and priorities. In the 1960s

and 1970s, Brittany obtained more EEC funding than any other French region. From the early 1970s also, the Brittany regional council took part in the combined effort to pull Brittany into the post-war industrial era (Bignon, 2000). Under the leadership of nationally renowned political figures – René Pleven, Raymond Marcellin, Yvon Bourges - the Brittany region established a reputation for efficient intervention in promoting economic development. Brittany's post-war economic performance has been assisted by public intervention, but the region has also developed its own endogenous models of agricultural and industrial development, based on an ethic of social co-operation, political consensus and rural-urban equilibrium and exchange (Phlipponneau, 1996). The strong economic development of Brittany in the 1980s was consistent with the model whereby the creation of new industrial wealth is the most effective in traditionally non-industrial regions, where labour organisations are weaker and labour flexibility greater. The tailing off of growth in the 1990s highlighted the fairly narrow basis of Breton industry (agro-alimentary, telecommunications, defence) and its dependency upon a cocktail of public contracts and external investment, as well as endogenous innovation. The importance of agriculture for the Breton economy, likewise, is a source of some anxiety given reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy and the crisis affecting intensive farming in the past decade. By distinguishing economic development as the second priority for regional expenditure, the Breton public again identified an area where regional action could (or should) make a difference. The two spending priorities of environmental policy and economic development illustrate a certain dilemma and uncertainty that Bretons face. On the one hand, they wish to continue their story of the Breton "economic miracle" (Le Bourdonnec, 1996) On the other hand, this very success,

based as it was on intensive agricultural methods, has endangered one of Brittany's greatest assets, its reputation for unspoiled natural products.

Transport-related issues ('Improving the roads, public transport') were the third most popular priority. Ever since the early 1950s the opening-up ('désenclavement') of Brittany has been a major demand of Breton political and business actors. The Brittany rail and roads plans of the early 1960s laid the bases for the development of a modern transport infrastructure (Martray, 1983). Improving the transport system has been a traditional demand of the Breton business community. This has been supported by the region's principal decision-makers. In our qualitative interviews, we identified the existence of rival advocacy coalitions over this issue. Most business and political actors favoured developing the region's transport infrastructure, arguing for the extension of the fast speed train (TGV) to Brest as an absolute priority to alleviate the geographical isolation of Brittany. A minority of interviewees feared that an improved transport infrastructure would threaten Breton identity by bringing the region closer to the rest of France. Our poll suggests the former priority figures more prominently within public opinion at large. Not content to prioritise areas where the region can make a difference, Breton public opinion also appears to be anticipating change. The identification of transport-related issues as the policy province of the Regional Assembly augurs well for central government efforts to strengthen the responsibilities of the Regions in this area.

Amongst the other priorities for regional expenditure we can identify three further areas closely linked to the specific attributes of Brittany: tourism, culture and training. Brittany is one of France's major tourist regions. That Bretons look to the regional

authority to promote tourism supports the proximity argument; regional investment is appropriate because the Region has detailed knowledge of local conditions. We might make a similar observation with respect to culture. It is entirely appropriate for the regional authority to promote culture, not only because culture is worth promoting, but also because it has a strong regional dimension. This is also the case for training, which, along with regional language policy, we subjected to more intense scrutiny.

In Brittany, support for expenditure on regional languages was very low down the list of popular priorities. Fewer than 1 per cent (4 of 1007) spontaneously identified support for Breton as the principal preference for future Regional Council expenditure. We should exercise some caution when interpreting this figure. Priorities for public expenditure do not automatically equate with issue saliency. In an area such as support for regional languages, policy objectives might be achieved with minimal additional public expenditure. And, as we demonstrated above, a majority of respondents identified the Region as the appropriate level for decision-making on language-related issues. But there may also be an awareness that the Region can do little in this regard at present and the central state should be the target of pressure in this field.

The case of training is rather different. It is also widely considered that training ought to be a regional level responsibility (Table Two). Unlike language policy, the French Regions have precise responsibilities in this policy area. We can surmise that regional preferences for increased spending on training (the public's fifth first priority) are derived from a combination of Brittany's specific training needs, an expectation of

public expenditure in this area and a cognisance of the actual policy responsibilities undertaken by the regional council. Training is also closely linked to economic development, which, as we have seen, is one of the two top priorities for public opinion.

The Breton public's regional expenditure preferences pinpoint issues of specific regional importance, rather than generic spending areas such as health and education. Table Three indicates expenditure preferences; it also reveals what regional authorities are perceived not to do. Consistent with our third hypothesis, we would not necessarily expect health to top the list of spending priorities for a French regional Assembly. The French system of health care is elaborately – and expensively – managed by a social partnership of employers and trade unions, increasingly closely monitored by the central state. The regions do not have any responsibilities therein (though the départements do). The fairly low ranking of education is rather more intriguing. Though France prides itself on its national education system, implying uniform standards and practices throughout the country, French regions also have important responsibilities in secondary and higher education (Cole, 2001). The regions build and maintain upper secondary schools (lycées) and some universities, provide equipment, participate in educational planning and – of great importance in Brittany – can make grants to private schools. Education is by far the largest spending item of all French regions, around 50% in the case of Brittany. We surmise that, though there is intense interest in Brittany in education, this issue area is perceived primarily either as a national or a more localised policy responsibility. The Regional councils have not yet drawn much political capital from their major budgetary investment in education over the past fifteen years. Education is one area



where the central state has succeeded in shedding responsibilities to the periphery (regional councils and state field services) while retaining strategic control.

Our second series of questions lead us to refine our argument somewhat. A logic of appropriateness appears to be at work. The Breton public favours a form of bounded regionality. It wants regional public expenditure to be concentrated in areas where regional institutions might make a difference, or where the image of Brittany itself is involved. In the core public policy areas of health and education, there is a preference even in regionally minded Brittany for a system of national regulation, consistent with French public service doctrine, equality of standards and the legacy of 150 years of ‘republican’ ideology.

### **What Future for Brittany?**

The Breton public seems remarkably well informed of the practical politics of French regionalism as it currently operates. But what are its preferences for the future? Table Four summarises responses to the key institutional question we posed in our comparative survey.

Refuting our second hypothesis, our findings confirm the existence of a Breton regional political consciousness. We observe overwhelming support for consolidating or strengthening existing regional institutions. There is virtually no constituency for the *status quo ante*; regional institutions are fully accepted as part of the normal democratic process. They leave entirely open the question of whether the Breton public would support a more thoroughgoing regional, or federal evolution. 44 per cent

were in favour of retaining the current situation (a regional council with limited powers) and only 2 per cent wished to abolish it. On the other hand, the answers to this question reveal a sizeable minority of 34 per cent, which is “regionalist” in the sense of seeking greater powers for the regional council similar to those possessed by the Scottish Parliament (“an elected parliament with tax-raising and legislative powers”) and a further 12 per cent wish to see “an autonomous Brittany”.<sup>2</sup>

The autonomy solution is confined to the margins of the political spectrum, a discovery confirmed by the absence of support for a strong autonomist political movement. Yet, the existence of a strong body of public opinion favourable to an accelerated regionalisation represents a challenge to the traditional model of bargained influence exercised by Breton politicians... one anticipated in advance by the increasingly regionalist theses espoused by Breton politicians of all ‘national’ parties

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<sup>2</sup> These four alternatives were intended to capture a progressive scale of regionalisation. Though functional equivalence guided our survey design, the possibilities offered to public opinion differed slightly between Wales and Brittany, in order to take into consideration linguistic and cognitive differences. In the case of Wales, we offered independence as a solution, consistent with the wording of the Wales referendum survey of 1997. In the case of Brittany, upon the advice of our control group we preferred ‘autonomy’, the term used by the UDB. ‘Autonomy’ signifies a large measure of constitutionally enshrined self-government within a quasi-federal system. It goes beyond the Scottish solution of tax-raising and legislative powers which could, in theory, be reclaimed by the centre.

----Table Four around here ----

To what extent are these contrasting viewpoints embedded in distinctive attitudes or party preferences? We sought to investigate further by cross-tabulating identity and regional voting intentions with institutional preference. We also tested for relationships between a range of structural attributes (age, gender, socio-economic group, education, locality) and institutional preferences. Full analysis of these variables lie outside of the scope of the present article. We will limit our analysis here to identity and voting preference – both of which involve agency as well as structure - rather than structural attributes for the purposes of making distinctions within public opinion.

---Table Five around here ---

Does identity matter? We asked respondents to state whether they considered themselves to be more Breton than French (15%), equally Breton and French (57%) or more French than Breton (22%). In the case of Brittany, the median position – equally Breton and French - overwhelmingly prevailed. This is consistent with received images of Breton political culture and society. The sense of regional identity is strong, but this is not considered as being in opposition to an overarching French nationhood. Regional identity is not a surrogate nationality.

Detailed analysis allowed us to explore certain relationships in more depth. As expected, clear relationships were established between identity and institutional preferences at the two extremes. Those considering themselves to be uniquely or

predominantly Breton were far more likely to advocate either a fully-fledged regional Assembly or an ‘autonomous’ statute for Brittany, than were those considering themselves to be primarily or entirely French. There also appears to be a clear relationship between the ability to speak Breton and an institutional preference in favour of greater regionalisation or autonomy. But the vast majority of respondents are neither Breton speakers, nor do they consider their identity as being primarily Breton.

Do parties matter? We observed surprisingly few differences according to voting intention. PS voters were scarcely more favourable than RPR voters to enhanced regional autonomy. These figures bear out the belief expressed in many interviews that institutional preferences cut across existing parties. Institutional choices can not be reduced to a simple left-right cleavage. The RPR President of the Brittany Region, Josselin de Rohan, might have a sceptical position on greater regionalisation, but many RPR voters do not share this view. Likewise, while the PS leader Jean-Yves Le Drian has repositioned the Socialist Party in favour of greater regional autonomy, most Socialist voters are happy with existing arrangements. In general terms, there has been an evolution of the French political class with regard to issues such as greater regional powers and the acceptance of minority languages. Most national political parties are now divided with a pro-regionalist and pro-minority language wing advocating more decentralisation and a traditional “jacobin” wing ardently defending the unity of the Republic.

These findings are consistent with existing representations of Breton political cleavages. There is a moderation of political conflict within the Brittany arena.

Moreover, national political parties are infused with Breton cultural values. There is also a distrust of political extremes, except in specific sub-cultural circumstances. While not going as far as to suggest a cross-partisan consensus on the broad issues facing Brittany, there is an underlying consensus to defend Breton interests to the outside world and limit political conflict.

### Conclusion

The findings presented in this article back up the analysis of regional governance in Brittany as a meso-level phenomenon. There is a marked sense of regional consciousness, based on a high measure of social consensus. Brittany is France's most distinctive mainland region. Bretons are proud of their region within the French nation.

In our introductory section, we developed four hypotheses, related to issues of Breton identity, autonomy, pragmatism and political opportunity structures. The evidence we have presented here allows us to reject the first two hypotheses. Breton identity is strong and there is widespread support for regional political institutions. While our findings allow us to establish the pertinence of the new regionalist problematic in the Breton case, our third and fourth hypotheses emphasise that theories of 'new regionalism' must be understood within the framework of an overarching state tradition that creates strong incentives for a system of national political regulation. While the majority of Bretons support the present institutions *faute de mieux*, a significant proportion would like them to be changed. Pragmatically, they accept that

the current institutions will not be able to deliver all the regionalist promises they would like, but they support them anyway (hypothesis three). The Region is identified as the appropriate space for most matters directly affecting all Bretons: the regional economy, urban and rural development, environmental issues, culture, training, language, transport. We observe, at the very least, a form of bounded regionality, which provides firm bases for a move to more enhanced forms of regional governance at a later date.

Above all, Breton regionalist political demands have traditionally been mediated by a system of national political parties. The political opportunity structure of the French Fifth Republic has generally inhibited the explicit mobilisation by national political parties of regionalist themes. The great national political parties – RPR, UDF, PS – have eschewed a regionalist discourse as they represent interests across France. The power to influence decision-making at a regional level continues to be mediated by a system of national regulation. Breton politicians of all (national) parties have looked as a priority to exercise influence in Paris, there where power lies. The last three Presidents of the Brittany region (Josselin de Rohan, Yvon Bourges and Raymond Marcellin) have all been nationally prominent Gaullist politicians, who have continued to occupy national elective offices while being regional president. Like his predecessors at the head of the Brittany region, the present incumbent, Josselin de Rohan, is also a Senator, who, in the derogatory opinion of one of his regional opponents, ‘governs Brittany from Paris’. Our findings support our third (pragmatism) and fourth (political opportunity structures) hypotheses.

The survey findings reveal a dynamic tension between underlying demands for enhanced regional autonomy and a reluctance to challenge the status quo. Despite their strong regional identity, Bretons are fairly evenly divided between those seeking a radical change (46%), (with 34% seeking an elected parliament with tax-raising and legislative powers and 12% an autonomous Brittany) in the constitutional status of the region and those who wish to maintain the status quo (44%), as revealed in Table Four. There is little explicit support for the region to take on board a number of policies which might be deemed “regionalist”, for example, greater financial support for the Breton language or regional competency in areas such as health and education. Furthermore, there is no support in the regional council for autonomist parties. This apparent surprise finding is not so surprising when placed in the context of the nature of the current regional institutions, which are not widely regarded as being, at present, the kind of region that Breton regionalists (that 46% of the population) would like to see eventually as their preferred form of regional government. While Breton politicians have traditionally fought shy of raising potentially divisive issues - such as language – which emphasise the distinctiveness of France’s Celtic region, there is some evidence that change is afoot. The decentralisation agenda of the new Raffarin government, which is the first to be led by a President of a Regional Council (Poitou-Charentes), promises to create an environment where even Brittany’s reluctant regionalists are encouraged to envisage bolder solutions.

Whether France’s partial and untidy decentralisation will be allowed to develop further will be one of the major questions for the new Raffarin government. Though we have not engaged in explicit comparison in this article, an explicitly comparative exercise would depict France as the only one of the five major European nations not

to be engaging in a form of polycentric state development on its mainland. Germany, Spain, the UK and Italy have each undergone developments that can in some senses be labelled as federal, or quasi-federal. Not so in mainland France, where the territorial uniformity underpinning the French State tradition outweighs in importance any cross-national moves towards emulation. We touch here at the core of state sovereignty which, in the French case, is intimately tied in with perceptions of national prestige and territorial hierarchy.

We should qualify our remarks. If the Matignon agreement had run its course, by 2004 France itself would have agreed to some legislative powers in Corsica, a major break with the principle of territorial equality across the Republic. Though the Corsican problem remains unresolved, the Raffarin government appears disposed to support the principle of regional experimentation, allowing those regions which so desire to go further than others. Brittany is the most distinctive of France's mainland regions. There is a strong sense of regional distinctiveness, but also a deeply embedded reluctance to transgress the established order. It is unlikely that conformist Brittany will pose a direct threat to the integrity of the French State, unless the French State itself decides to lead the way. While respectful of established norms and processes, our findings suggest on balance that the Breton public would welcome a move towards greater regionalisation. The capacity to accommodate increased regional diversity will be a test for the long-term evolution of the French Republic itself.

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